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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000233

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DAKAR PASS RAO, DAO, AND ODC

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SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKER REMOVED,
PRO-JAMMEH RALLY

REF: A. BANJUL 212

[1](#)B. BANJUL 193

[1](#)C. BANJUL 225

[1](#)D. BANJUL 222

[1](#)E. BANJUL 230

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The National Assembly Speaker, Sheriff Dibba, suspected of involvement in the failed coup plot, was released from detention April 15, but removed from the National Assembly by President Jammeh. A senior National Intelligence Agency official, Keemo Balajo, was also released and his job restored. Amidst GOTG's ongoing silence over the detainees, we estimate their current number at around 25; besides the General Manager and Editor-in-Chief of the journal, "Independent," one of its journalists is now also in detention. At the pro-Jammeh rally April 15, the irascible, blunt-speaking Jammeh justified his own successful coup in 1994, vowed to remain in power "at least thirty years," (i.e., via re-election), asserted -- in a possible reference to Senegal -- that he feared no other country, "particularly within our sub-region," and harshly attacked the opposition parties. It remains to be seen whether, following Jammeh's outburst, any semblance of the improved dialog in recent months between the GOTG/APRC and the opposition parties will survive. END SUMMARY.

SPEAKER'S REMOVAL

2.. (SBU) The reverberations from the March 21 aborted coup plot here continue, as the GOTG announced April 13 President Jammeh's decision, effective that day, to remove the country's third ranking official, National Assembly Speaker Sheriff Dibba, from his post and the Assembly itself. In its statement, the GOTG noted that Dibba was a presidentially-appointed Assembly deputy and cited the specific constitutional provisions authorizing Jammeh's action. Jammeh designated Majanko Samusa (unknown to us) to fill Dibba's Assembly seat, while Deputy Speaker Belinda Bidwell continues to serve as Acting Speaker, according to the announcement.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The GOTG's statement cited Dibba's "alleged involvement" in the failed coup plot as the reason for his removal, but gave no details of such involvement. As

previously reported (ref a), authorities had detained Dibba April 6; subsequent to his removal, the media reported his release from custody on April 15. (COMMENT: Rumor has it that, if the coup plot had succeeded, Dibba would have appointed interim head of the new regime, but, if he was indeed implicated, the reason for his release is unclear. END COMMENT.)

STATUS OF DETAINEES

14. (SBU) By our reckoning, Dibba's release leaves one Assembly deputy still in detention, Dembo Dem, associated with the ruling APRC party. Following another recent release, that of National Intelligence Agency (NIA) Keemo Balajo -- who has resumed his duties as NIA's Deputy Director General -- we estimate the current number of detainees at around 25; among them are three members of the staff of the still-closed daily, "Independent," besides the previously detained General Manager Madi Ceesay and Editor-in-Chief Musa Saidykhon (ref b), a journalist with the paper, Lamin Fatty was detained April 10, according to media reports. Meanwhile, the GOTG remains silent about the precise number and identities of detainees as well as possible charges against them and trial dates. To our knowledge, all detainees continue to be held incommunicado; we will continue our demarches to the GOTG to urge granting of access (including Embassy access to Amcit Tamsir Jasseh) and respect for detainees' rights generally (refs a and c report our approaches to senior Presidential adviser and Foreign Affairs Permsec).

PRO-JAMMEH RALLY

15. (SBU) The much-heralded public rally in support of Jammeh occurred on schedule April 15 (ref d), featuring a march through downtown Banjul to an outdoor sports stadium.

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Although the event's slogan was "say no to coups and yes to democracy," it had a distinctly partisan component; ruling APRC party banners were plentiful as were baseball caps and other apparel emblazoned with APRC insignia among the several thousand attendees. Judging from extensive television coverage of the several-hour event, there were no opposition party representatives on hand; the diplomatic corps was invited, but Ambassador declined and few attended (Cuban Ambassador, Liberian and Nigerian Charges appeared in the footage).

JAMMEH'S REMARKS -- A VINTAGE PERFORMANCE

16. (SBU) Following remarks by various GOTG Ministers and others known as APRC stalwarts, Jammeh himself addressed the assemblage (full text of his remarks will be sent to AF/W). It was a vintage performance by the irascible, blunt-speaking Jammeh, who began by justifying his own successful coup attempt in 1994, saying he had acted out of a sincere commitment to "move the country forward" and make it "a beacon of hope for all of Africa." He went on to assert that coups undertaken out of "tribalism" or concern for power and materia aggrandizement were unacceptable, while those (such as his) undertaken to "rescue the country from the brink of catastrophe," should be welcomed.

17. (SBU) Jammeh stressed his love of country and dedication to seeing it progress, stating, "if I ever betray The Gambia, any patriotic Gambian can overthrow me." Addressing prospects of his stepping down, he vowed not to do so until the country's development process is complete and it "becomes a superpower." He referred on various occasions to his concern for the proper exploitation of the country's oil wealth. (COMMENT: In fact, the magnitude of Gambian oil reserves -- and whether they are commercially viable -- is

unknown. END COMMENT) He warned would-be successors that they would have "at least thirty years" to wait before he handed over power. (COMMENT: At this point, we inclined to interpret Jammeh's vow to stay in power for "thirty years" not as signifying an intention to abrogate the constitution or scrap elections, but rather as an expression of confidence that he will continue to win re-election as President for some time to come. END COMMENT)

¶8. (SBU) Turning to foreign relations, Jammeh defiantly stated, "there is not a country that we are scared of today, particularly within our sub-region." He asserted that he would not permit any country to "tamper" with The Gambia's "peace, progress, and oil" and that it had ample means to defend itself. In this regard, he remarked, "what we have in terms of weapons, I will not show, but if anyone wants to test it, I will show it and use it on you." (COMMENT: Amidst the heightened tensions with Senegal over the failed plot -- see ref e -- in making the foregoing remarks, Jammeh may well have had in mind The Gambia's far more powerful neighbor, Senegal. END COMMENT)

¶9. (SBU) Jammeh used the occasion to take a swipe at the opposition, saying it lacked the patriotism and sincere desire for the country's development of a "genuine opposition." Instead, he continued, The Gambia's opposition movement is composed of "tribalists, a group of hate-centered greedy parasites" who failed to congratulate the government for "positive developments" and instead focused only on criticizing it. Alluding to the 2006-7 Presidential and National Assembly elections, he stated that "the lunatics" comprising the opposition were doomed to failure because of their allegedly tribalist orientation.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Jammeh had heretofore refrained from cracking down on the opposition parties in the aftermath of the failed coup plot, and his harsh criticism of them was nothing new. However, given these parties' gestures of late -- i.e. statements condemning the plot -- the ferocity of Jammeh's attack on them at an event ostensibly designed to promote national solidarity is worrisome. It remains to be seen whether, following Jammeh's outburst, any semblance of the improved dialog between the GOTG/APRC and the opposition in recent months will survive. END COMMENT.
STAFFORD